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ABSTRACT

A practicum was designed to increase mildly intellectually disabled students' written communication skills by demonstrating functional written expression skills in daily assignments and in social communication. A sequenced reading and language program with the integration of journal writing and computer applications was utilized. Seventh- and eighth-grade students with mild disabilities were provided a structured, language-rich environment in which to communicate. The instructor planned structured activities that involved reading, audiovisuals, current events, and cooperative activities along with a structured, daily writing program. Collaboration was an important aspect in that students were involved in many role playing and verbal rehearsal activities to increase conversation and writing skills. Writing to convey a message was emphasized initially and students were introduced to the function of words in sentences. Progress was monitored using holistic scoring methods. Review of the practicum outcomes revealed 7 out of 10 students were able to demonstrate functional written expression skills in journals and on daily assignments after a competent writer had modeled structure. Students interaction in cooperative activities provided an excellent platform for writing. Students displayed motivation to communicate. Appropriate use of mechanics was documented along with increases in spelled words, sentence length, and legibility. Reading and language instruction reinforced mechanics rules and built upon them. Increased success is predicted if more time is provided for the program. (Contains a figure and 23 references.) (Author/TB)

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ED 381 791

Improving Written Expression of Seventh Grade Mildly Intellectually Disabled Students Utilizing A Basal Reading Program, Journal Writing and Computer Applications

by

Sabrenai R. Wimberly

Cluster 61

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A Practicum I Report Presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University

1994

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

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Approved:

1/24/95
Date of Final Approval of Report

Mary W. Staggs, Ed.D.
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ABSTRACT

Improving Written Expression of Seventh Grade Mildly Intellectually Disabled Students by Utilizing a Basal Reading Program, Journal Writing Strategies, and Computer Applications. Wimberly, Sabrenai R., 1994: Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Special Education/Language Arts/Cooperative Learning/Collaborative Instruction.

This practicum was designed to increase mildly intellectually disabled students' written communication skills by demonstrating functional written expression skills in daily assignments and in social communication. A sequenced reading and language program with the integration of journal writing and computer applications were utilized.

Students with mild disabilities were provided a structured, language rich environment in which to communicate. The writer planned structured activities that involved reading, audiovisuals, current events, and cooperative activities along with a structured, daily writing program. Collaboration was an important aspect in that students were involved in many role playing and verbal rehearsal activities to increase conversation and writing skills. Writing to convey a message was emphasized initially and students were introduced to the functions of words in sentences. Progress was monitored using holistic scoring methods.

Review of the practicum outcomes revealed seven out of ten students were able to demonstrate functional written expression skills in journals and on daily assignments after a competent writer had modeled structure. Students interaction in cooperative activities provided an excellent platform for writing. Students displayed motivation to communicate. Appropriate usage of mechanics is documented along with increases in correctly spelled words, sentence length, and legibility. Reading and language instruction reinforced mechanics rules and built upon them. Increased success is predicted if more time is provided for the program.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Community

The practicum took place in the heart of the state in a community which has a population of 149,967. The family form has changed. The number of whites in 1989 was 86,252, the number of blacks was 62,526, and persons of Hispanic origin of any race was 916 persons. It is estimated that 35,000 citizens can neither read nor write and one third of the total population is at a disadvantage. Education within the community has a loss of coherence. This resulted from elevated mobility, gradual erosion of the community and the replacement of the extended family with the nuclear family, convolution of personal goals resulting in a sense of individual ineffectiveness in a mass society; and there is an evolution of interest groups and politics.

There were 38 public schools in the community with 25,000 students, 1,059 teachers, and 1,069 graduates. The system's black population was 14,917, the white population was 9,083 and other races include 179. School students were administered the writing assessments which are components of the state skills tests, criterion referenced tests, and curriculum based assessments. The results at

the elementary level indicated national norm level achievement. However, after students leave the seventh grade the scores don't reflect favorable results.

Each school has on-site support services based on the needs of students. The programs vary from school to school. Circumstances warranted that local business leaders and educators involve the entire community in the establishment of an educational culture to assure that all citizens have an excellent education.

Writer's Work Setting and Role

The writer's work setting was in a middle school which afforded students with integrated programs. The population was approximately 1150 with grades seven and eight. The curriculum was composed of language arts, math, social studies, science, personal development, exploratory, and physical education. The day was flexible with six 45 minute periods, one 25 minute lunch, and one 25 minute personal development period. The faculty and staff consisted of one principal, two assistant principals, three counselors, 51 regular education teachers, 11 special education teachers, two media specialists, one in-school suspension coordinator, seven paraprofessionals, one registrar, and support staff.

Students were organized in clusters and organized by grade levels ranging from 90 to 150 students. Teachers were organized in clusters of interdisciplinary teams consisting from three to five teachers with one hour and thirty minutes of common planning time. Special education teachers were assigned to the clusters. The writer, teachers, parents, consultants, paraprofessionals,

therapists, and principals were involved in planning and/or implementing students' instructional programs.

The writer was directly related to mildly intellectually disabled students in an instructional manner as a teacher. The writer had an advantage within the information society because McCune (1986) stated the role has been expanded to "teacher as manager, expert, facilitator of information and resources, teacher as curriculum manager and planner" (p.67). Other specific duties were that she evaluated each student's learning styles and ensured adaptations in the special education program. She communicated to administrators and classroom teachers curriculum modifications that were appropriate for students. The writer participated in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) placement committees, planned and made instructional materials for classroom use, adapted media, materials and learning strategies to meet the needs of the students.

The writer believed that she was capable of solving the practicum problem because of quality education, experience and training in the field of special education. Additionally, the writer has had administrative experience. Further, skills and knowledge gained from new paradigms in leadership had enlightened the writer and had reaffirmed that she had considerable latitude to use her knowledge and talents in her environment. New techniques have stimulated her proactivity in creating, monitoring, and managing her environment. The writer instructed in a self-contained model where students spent four or more hours daily in one area of special education. The students required a more structured program over a

longer period of time. Class sizes range from 10 to 14 students. The curriculum was composed of language arts, math, social studies, and science. The instructional time was divided into four 45 minute periods in order of importance. The writer made the atmosphere conducive to learning and thoroughly implemented the educational program according to the students' Individualized Education Plans.

The community has changed demographically in a 10 year span of time due to the migration of families to outer lying areas of the county. The number of births over the past 15 years has made the school enrollments soar. Even with constant societal changes, the middle school was still viewed as effective in responding to the learning needs of students.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Mildly intellectually disabled students experienced difficulties in communicating in writing due to errors in sentence structure, confusion with uses of groups or classes of words in simple sentences, and with organization, and legibility. 14 student's written expression skills were poor and each exhibited an inability to use writing to functionally communicate. During skills exercises, the writer observed students beginning sentences with small letters, using irregular verbs incorrectly, and omitting appropriate punctuation.

Problem Documentation

Deficiencies in written expression were documented in students academic records and in current literature. The writer observed deficiencies in students' daily assignments that were recorded in the grade book. Errors were constantly exhibited in capitalization, punctuation, subject verb agreement, and organization. Mather and Lachowicz (1992) stated "students with learning problems find it difficult to write because of struggles with mechanical skills of writing, spelling, and punctuation" (p. 26). Kanning (1987) provided

evidence that problems in mechanics are exhibited in learning disabled students. Deficiencies were displayed in all assignments in which the students had to form complete sentences after reading for information. Handwriting deficiencies entailed improper letter formation. On several occasions students couldn't read their own writing on cue.

Montague and Fonseca (1993) stated that "for students who have learning problems, writing can be both physically and psychologically demanding" (p. 80). Students displayed organizational difficulties in heading papers. For example, writing the name, date, and subject in the top right hand corner of the notebook paper for all class assignments was difficult. Students don't organize information on the paper. Since this is an information society, Naisbitt (1986) clearly elaborated "in this literacy intensive society, when we need basic reading and writing skills more than ever before; our educational system is turning out an increasingly inferior product" (p. 11). Being able to functionally communicate will be an advantage in the information society. Hasbrouck, Tindal and Parker (1994) stated that learning disabled students characteristically have problems with productivity, syntax, mechanics, content, and organization.

Students exhibited difficulties in communicating effectively on daily assignments. School cumulative records indicated persistent difficulties in writing. Records made available were standardized test summaries and psychological evaluation results. It was noted that subtest scores for most students were low in oral and written

expressive language. Writing samples, which were graded objectively indicated several deficiencies in writing. Students performed below the writer's standards. Individualized Education Plans indicated deficiencies in writing and language.

Causative Analysis

The writer observed that many causes were immediate and varied. Students' writing skills are delayed due to psychosocial disadvantages and cultural-familial disadvantages. Psychosocial disadvantages are related to cultural-familial disadvantages, which are degrees of cultural deprivation, such as impoverished environments, inadequate diets, inadequate medical care, history of infectious diseases related highly to mental retardation and/or slow development. Psychosocial factors are prominent environmental factors that cause low cognitive functioning. Cultural-familial influences were existent. The writer observed through work experiences, home visits, and parent conferences, that several students that were mildly intellectually disabled met the psychosocial criteria of being impoverished and had a family history of siblings or parent retardation.

It was evidenced that socially, students were in non-stimulating environments which were causes of cognitive, intellectual, and physical deficits in children which precluded problems in language development. Psychosocial factors have a great effect on language. As a part of psychosocial and cultural-familial disadvantages, students spoke non standard English which was within

the cultural norm. Black English is inclusive of all the errors in syntax, and subject verb agreement.

In some instances, English is a second language to students who are black and born in the United States. Black English is quite functional for minority students. The writer observed that tasks involving language were becoming increasingly difficult for many disabled students. Some students don't like to write because of this. Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990) stated "the language of the information age is English" (p. 142). The language is universal; therefore, it is crucial that students adequately master it. Vacc (1985) indicated that previous problems in writing influenced low motivation to write and students discounted writing as an important form of communication. Overall, cultural deprivation impeded written expression.

Most importantly, etiologies or biological abnormalities which produce low cognitive functioning are causes that precluded all involved with the mildly intellectually disabled. The writer was familiar with several areas through work experience which were causes of students retardation and developmental delays. They were pre and post-natal infections, intoxication, pre or post-natal trauma, nutritional factors, chromosomal anomalies, gestational disorders, and brain diseases. Grant, Lazarus and Peyton (1992) stated that written language for the mildly disabled is different and delayed. Mitchell (1982) stated educably mentally handicapped students can't form emotional explanations due to low intelligence quotients. Students have inadequate phonological, morphological, syntactic, and

semantic aspects of language. Mitchell (1982) further stated that "short attention spans, poor retention, and difficulty with word association detract from learning processes" (p. 3).

Writing wasn't addressed on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Parker, Tindal, and Hasbrouck (1991) stated regular education teachers as well as special education teachers have neglected writing instruction. Hasbrouck, Tindal and Parker (1994) stated that "the scarcity of IEP objectives for written expression may be caused by the lack of a valid, reliable, and easily used assessment tool to determine specific writing skills" (p. 18). Hadaway and Tishe (1987) stated that outdated teaching methods caused problems in written expression. Normally, in the writer's work place the assessment of students' writing skills was virtually nil unless the assessment had been performed by a school psychologist. Tests available to assess writing were time consuming and difficult to score. Students had few opportunities during the school year to write with the exception of copying activities. Students exhibited such difficulties with perceptual skills and more emphasis was placed on the components of handwriting than functional expressive writing.

Written communication wasn't a priority in the instructional program. The primary interest was on reading improvement and comprehension skills rather than a mutual focus on the components of language. The writer observed that associates had reading as a main focus. Semmel (1989) stated "writing has historically been ignored as a vital part of the curriculum, and when it has been taught generally it has been reduced to a series of exercises with emphasis

on transcription aspects of writing" (p. 47). Writing is directly related to reading; but it was still overlooked.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

Even though the concerns were on writing, the methods by which practitioners taught writing were directly related to the way they taught reading. Current literature documented the ways practitioners have dealt with written communication. The writer dealt with the problems of written communication based on the experiences in the writers acquisition of language skills. The writer was taught reading and writing using many methods.

The majority of the methods were linguistic or word centered approaches. The approaches were plausible for the writer and many others. However, the writer observed new teaching methods for reading and writing which were psycholinguistic approaches and were considered to be the better design for teaching reading and writing because words have a range of possible meanings in context. After reviewing the literature the writer gained increased and varied insights regarding the acquisition of skills in written expression. The literature focused on holistic learning in writing. Psycholinguistic or meaning centered approaches, language experience, process, and whole language approaches were used in improving writing skills.

The literature documents that reading and writing aren't only learned using part to whole approaches such as phonics approaches, sight word approaches, linguistic, and basal approaches. Concerns were with assisting writers to put their own knowledge through

individual and group experiences into writing. With holistic methods, emphasis has been placed on learning rather than teaching. The frequency and the duration of reading and writing was purported to be longer.

Students read and write for a purpose. Students learned through related exposure. Literature documented that children in psycholinguistic environments produced more written language than students in phonics and skills environments because they aren't concentrating on syntactics. Phonics and skills environments were based on common sense approaches to reading and writing. Concepts were presented sequentially, from reading and writing letters, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Word centered approaches aren't sequential because theorists believe that everyone doesn't learn in sequence depending upon their exposure to the environment. Students' efforts were concentrated on meaning. Even invented spellings were acceptable because structure isn't the initial focus. However, syntactics was introduced later in the language instruction. The writer observed that children learn in a variety of environments using an array of techniques and this method seemed justifiable as an additional method to teach language skills. Some studies have indicated that language was better learned in context than in isolation. The writer simply verified that there were other justifiable means to teach writing and not discounting the part to whole methods.

The writer used part to whole or basal approaches in reading and writing because of familiarity with the process. The focus was

on using a variety of skills to identify and use words. The methods for writing were skills structured and based on the improvement of writing free of errors in mechanics and form. The skills were taught using direct approaches for spelling, mechanics and grammar. It was assumed that the comprehension and writing skills would transcend or come later. It was evidenced that students within the class wanted to write because of the observed note passing in class. Opportunities were presented for students to display their creativity; but not on a daily basis. Part to whole methods aren't viewed by many as a more refined technique for encouraging writing.

The writer introduced many activities to students which reviewed the skills of writing; but not in all instances were the skills easily transcended into the other subject areas. The writer purely viewed writing skills from a product perspective even though there was a familiarity with holistic methods. In modeling accurate sentence structure, feedback was given by correcting errors and rewriting the words, phrases, and sentences. The writer hoped that the students would model the corrections. This didn't occur regularly. However, students regularly received an auditory antecedent to assist in generalizing skills from one subject area to another. Discontinuation of the antecedent resulted in failure to generalize acquired skills.

Practitioners approaches were all derived from a psycholinguistic framework. Each method was similar; but instructional techniques varied. Strategies were comparable to the learning modalities and skills acquisition levels just as the part to

whole approaches. The writer interpreted the literature based on her background and experience in language instruction.

Successes were documented in two similar approaches that were researched and implemented by practitioners (Farley, 1986; Grant, Lazarus, & Peyton, 1992; McGrath, 1992) to improve functional writing. Interaction studies were examined to determine their applicability in improving language functions. (Farley, 1986; Grant, Lazarus, & Peyton, 1992; McGrath, 1992) each focused on dialogue journal writing which is a written reflection of students' experiences. Interaction was between two persons and was viewed by McGrath (1992) as the connection between students, teachers, and the content area. Students' writing growth was stimulated by language rich experiences. Students modeled the responses of competent writers. The writer previously focused on structure instead of what was being communicated by the student. Therefore, there may have been a possibility of modeling if there had been a change in strategy. The writer views herself as a competent writer and has made the presumption that if a message was communicated to students rather than emphasizing structure, there may have been more modeling. Practitioners indicated that journals may vary with the students learning modality. Accommodations were made as needed. Journals may be in the form of audiotape journals for the hearing impaired, oral journals, response journals, and computer dialogue journals.

Each type of journal served a unique purpose for students with various learning modalities. Farley (1986) reported that educably mentally retarded (EMR) students performed poorly in written

expression and he analyzed the written dialogue of the educable mentally retarded and found results that were more noteworthy than other practitioners. After interaction in students' journals between the teacher and the student, Farley (1986) documented that students acquired and sustained functionally relevant and age appropriate writing. Grant et al.(1992) and McGrath (1992) incorporated the same response journal technique and noted that the journals may be used in diverse populations. In Grant et al. (1992) the duration of time spent on journal writing varied from Farley's. Farley (1986) devoted time for students to make journal entries daily to writing and Grant et al. (1992) devoted 15 minutes three times weekly. Increased writing time improves skills.

Additionally, in comparison to Farley (1986), Grant et al. (1992) directly partnered students with literate writers for modeling and acquisition of correct skills. However, increased fluency wasn't gained in Grant et al. (1992); but patterning or modeling was evidenced. The writer interpreted patterning to mean improvement in syntactics. The writer concluded due to the short duration and frequency of writing the fluency wasn't displayed. The intervention presented by Grant et al. (1992) was 6 weeks. The intervention presented by Farley (1986) was 40 days. Grant et al. (1992) concluded that journal writing is a form of long term written communication. The writer surmised that increased length of time and daily entries for writing increases the chances of improvements in writing when interaction is with a literate writer.

However, McGrath (1992) had a different population from Farley (1986) and Grant et al.(1992). She documented that her post secondary students evaluated dialogue journals and related that the strategy benefitted everyone involved in the interaction. Even though McGrath (1992) was seeking a solution to improving conversation, her strategy was indeed similar to other practitioners. Her learning disabled population participated in daily writing activities involving dialogue which allowed the teacher to respond. An accurate model for language acquisition was allowed in teacher responses. Again, the practitioner indicated frequency of writing and partnering with literate writers as a strong indicator of success in increasing written language.

Offering different instructional techniques using interaction was Mather and Lachowicz (1992). Practitioners used a similar holistic framework and interaction approaches; but employed a different method of instruction. The technique of shared writing was employed. This is more of a language experience and process approach to writing. The students share in the writing process. Although students skill levels varied, each student was paired with a competent student writer. Similar to the dialogue journal, shared writing focused on students' strengths. The methodology focused on student interaction and participation to encourage reluctant writers. The practitioners implicated collaborative instruction as a main intensity of the strategy. It differs in that modeling of correct structure and form is from a peer.

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Elements of the process approach were incorporated. Emphasis was placed on writing about student experiences, students selecting the topic, immediate feedback, and the establishment of a community of writers. They concluded that over a period of several weeks increased writing skills would be exhibited. This was presumed viable for higher functioning disabled student.

Literature revealed another feasible holistic means to improve writing of disabled students. (Vallecorsa, Ledford and Parnell; 1990; Mitchell, 1987; Hadaway and Tishe, 1987) each attested to the writing process as an effective approach to teach writing to disabled students. Variations of the process approach were selected and integrated into the writing process. The practitioners purported successful results in that the process approach was effective for increasing the length of writing. Similar to the techniques of aforementioned practitioners, some interaction methods were used involving writing conferences between students and teachers. Process approaches focus on the conveyance of meaning. Other variations of the process model were employed by Hadaway and Tishe (1987) and both viewed prewriting activities as crucial to the success of a writing program.

Time and frequency were another important component. In a complimentary endeavor, Mitchell (1987) employed the procedural approach with educable mentally retarded students focusing on self concept and provided successful student experiences of role playing and group discussions before writing. He believed that many disabled students exhibited problems in developing language related skills.

Role playing and group discussions are language related and assist in producing writing. Mitchell (1987) believed that "creativity is strongly related to self concept" (p. 2). The writer agrees that oral language is conducive to writing.

Vallecorsa et al. (1990) worked with learning disabled students and offered varied process strategies and requested that all students view writing as a staged process of planning, drafting, editing, and revising. Successes were seen in the improvement of vocabulary and length of compositions. Practitioners documented that various components of the process approach are viable for any type of improvement in writing. They indicated that the process may be used on a smaller scale with lower functioning students.

It's unequivocal that the results from process writing were viewed as effective and positive attitudes were developed toward writing as skills improved.

(Hasselbring and Goin, 1988; Semmel, 1989; and Vacc, 1985) employed various instructional methods which included holistic approaches; but integrated computers into writing. Even though each practitioner integrated computers, the strategies were quite different. Hasselbring and Goin (1988) examined three instructional approaches and documented that procedural instruction allowed the teacher to provide strategies for students to generate ideas in writing. The students generalized the writing procedures to other writing situations. Practitioners examined idea processor where the students employed a seven stage writing process in defending a position. The idea processor and the inclusion of the computers

produced the most desired results. In contrast Semmel (1989) focused on whole to part learning, collaboration, and computer technology. His focus was on partners producing meaningful writing rather than transcription. Variations of the psycholinguistic approach and components of the process approach were employed. The methodology of student selection of topics, establishing a connection between the current writing activity, and personal experiences was important. Other similar holistic approaches viewed by Semmel (1989) as effective along with the integration of the computer are dialogue journals.

Hasselbring and Goin (1988) stated that there needs to be more clarification in determining what part the computer should play in the writing process because they found no difference in the writing of students who used computers and handwritten assignments. Length correlated highly with the skills of keyboarding. In contrast, the article, "When Technology Meets Process Writing", the editor asserted "computers have an obvious place in the five stages of process writing" (p. 100). Moreover, Semmel (1989) documented that the microcomputer was important in engaging the students in the writing process. Similarly, Peck and Dorncott (1994) stated "technology creates opportunities for students to do meaningful work" (p. 13). The practitioners listed this statement as one of the ten reasons for using technology. Technology provides the chance for creation of school work for display. It was further stated that computers were an impetus for students to write.

Vacc (1987) in contrast to Hasselbring and Goin (1988) viewed microcomputers easier for mildly handicapped students to use because of difficulties in writing. Vacc (1987) documented that the quality of writing improved and students were more motivated to write. Problems in written expression have been documented in education and other areas. Students with disabilities have varied causes for poor written expression skills. Practitioners have sought methods to improve written expression by researching theory and putting it into practice through modifying instructional techniques. Many have proven to be plausible.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The goal projected for the practicum was that targeted mildly intellectually disabled middle school students would demonstrate skills in written communication. Students would demonstrate functional written expression skills in daily assignments and in social communication.

Expected Outcomes

After a review of the literature, the following outcomes were projected for this practicum. The anticipated end results would reflect that 12 out of 14 students will exhibit written expression for the purposes of communication. Sentence structure would display a decrease in errors in syntax. Capitalization and punctuation would be demonstrated in declarative and interrogative sentences. Use of commas will be exhibited in sentences with pauses. Successful demonstration of uses and classes of words in simple sentences would be evidenced displaying the proper usage of subject and verb agreement and appropriate verb tense. Organization and legibility of daily work would be constant.

Samples of functional writing served as the method for determining success. The evaluation tool for assessing writing is a

holistic method called objective scoring. Overall, it was expected that students would exhibit an increase in scores on 80% of all assignments submitted according to the teachers' objective assessment criteria. Successes implicated writing as teachable and effortlessly scoreable which provided a basis for monitoring and planning a program of study.

Measurement of Outcomes

There are simple techniques to chart the progress of students' writing. The objective scoring method discussed by Hasbrouck and Tindal (1994) is used when students such as disabled students have problems in writing. Practitioners stated that there are many aspects of the writing process that are closely related to communication. Hasbrouck and Tindal (1994) discussed a direct process of objective grading. They explained when students are consistently writing legible sentences, the focus may be turned to the use of correctly spelled words, syntactically correct phrases, and mechanics. The authors further stated that the communicative quality of the students' writing is assessed.

They implemented this method through a standardized process, such as providing a story starter, a time frame for students to think of what they wanted to write, and a writing period. It was suggested by the authors that teachers collect the samples over a period of a few days to average the scores to evaluate students skills. The writer altered the method and collected samples weekly in order to carefully monitor progress. The instructional implications were that the students' progress could be monitored for the duration of the

program. Additionally, guided practice activities may be generated by the teacher when there are an enormity of problems in a specific area.

It is the writer's evaluation that the assessment device is reliable and valid as it yielded the same results each time used to measure a specific written language skill and measured what it purported to measure. The writer ensured that the instrument measured writing in the same way each time. It is a valid measurement of the construct of interest. The areas measured were percentages of legible words, numbers of correctly spelled words, numbers of correct word sequences, numbers of correctly punctuated sentences, and mean length of correct word sequences.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

Mildly intellectually disabled students had difficulties in communicating in writing. Written expression skills were poor and there was an inability to communicate.

Possible solutions gleaned from the literature were plausible because of the successes documented in the literature. The following solutions had been tried before when practitioners were faced with similar problems with positive results. Mather and Lachowicz (1992) integrated process writing and cooperative learning using shared writing. Fluency and organizational skills were predicted to increase. Hadaway and Tishe (1987) integrated process writing.

There were increases shown in the length of writing. Grant, Lazarus, and Peyton, 1992; Farley, 1986; McGrath (1992) integrated process writing and modeling using dialogue journals. There were increases observed in patterning or modeling in writing. The writer interpreted modeling to mean the correct organization of information on the paper, correct usage of mechanics, and increased punctuation in students' writing. Mitchell (1982) integrated creative writing which improved students' self concept and writing. Semmel (1989) integrated cooperative learning and varied instructional approaches.

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Hasselbring and Goin (1988) integrated procedural approaches and computers.

The procedural approach increased writing skills; but the practitioners were unsure of what place the computer is actually supposed to serve. Vacc (1985) used computer assisted instruction and strong evidence indicated that the use of computers increased the quality of students' writing through increasing legibility and skills Strong evidence of success in the literature assisted in the generation of the following ideas for the writer's proposed solution strategy. The writer evaluated all of the methods used by practitioners.

Each method may be used separately; but there was more of an effect when several ideas were used in combination. The writer integrated the combined ideas computers, cooperative learning, modeling, prewriting or language rich experiences into the existing program.

Description of Selected Solution

The writer's vision was to enhance the current language arts program by including holistic writing methods. Although, the writer uses basal reading methods which focus on skills, she views the skills method as good. She has observed that mildly disabled students become more proficient when information is introduced in parts. However, since the writer strongly felt that each student is either a global or analytical learner that the addition of holistic methods in the language arts curriculum would certainly increase the chances of the students producing effective and functional

communication. The solution strategy was to continue the basal reading approach and integrate holistic methods of response writing with a critical emphasis on prewriting activities on a daily basis for 20 minutes daily, Monday through Friday, and increasing writing to 35 minutes during the seventh, eighth, and ninth weeks of implementation. The teacher as the literate respondent was most feasible for modeling of skills to occur. Prewriting activities were crucial to writing. Prewriting is an active learning activity which triggers relevant frames of reference before writing.

The writer simultaneously implemented a sequenced reading and language skills program in phonology, semantics, and syntactics, and later introduced writing across all disciplines with the integration of writing activities. Once significant progress had been documented, computers were introduced to increase students awareness of it as a helpful writing tool. Development of syntactics was facilitated by encouraging students to observe the structure of written language in texts and apply them. This solution was more advantageous than the others because the writer had a population that was comparable to the mildly disabled populations in the literature. The literature gave valid and reasonable inference that the journal technique was more feasible due to students low cognitive functioning.

The evidence was conclusive that the students would model correct structure of an accurate writer. Activities were easily geared to each students needs considering the class size. The resources that the writer had access to complemented the intended instruction. The equipment that was needed was readily available

through the technology department and the computer lab which was in close proximity to the writer's classroom. The writer arranged to have at least one computer in the classroom area at all times with accompanying word processing software.

Bruder (1993) indicated that children working in small groups fostered performance. The classroom paraprofessional provided technical assistance of recording and logging information and assisted the writer with the intervention. For example, the types of activities that the writer implemented were daily lessons that were introduced in language arts following the story lessons which drew on the students' thoughts from the story they listened to and/or from current events and teachers' responses. On many days the writer used a basic instructional strategy called "Outcome Sentences". Harmin (1994) stated "students write after reflecting on a lesson or experience, prompted by phrases" (p.25). This strategy was used after presentations, speakers, discussions of current events, films, units and holiday vacations.

On occasion, this strategy was used to facilitate homework on a reading assignment. The students developed their own homework. Many journal entries were based on what students wanted to write or talk about. There were always comprehension exercises and each story that is read and discussed had a particular moral to it. The lesson was extended by giving an outcome sentence or students were asked to discuss their feelings about the story if the writer feels that the students had enough background knowledge along with what had been presented in the story. Friday's were for students to make a journal

entry devoted to simply making personal communication with the writer.

The writer initiated the process by initiating a prewriting activity which discussed something the writer had done personally to motivate the students to write. The writer entitled this outcome sentence, "Dear Teacher". The writer took the journals home over the weekend and provided a response for students.

Activities were completed on a routine basis because it had been the writer's observation that mildly intellectually disabled students faired better in a structured and routine setting. The writer responded in every students journal on a daily basis to provide modeling of accurate writing. Additionally, language skills activities were generalized through adaptations in presentation of students lessons across subject areas; therefore, the skills weren't reviewed in isolation. The writer integrated computer technology once progress had been observed and documented in sentence structure. If there were serious problems with handwriting, the writer had the option to introduce computers earlier in the process. The solution was justified due to previous successes documented in the literature in decreasing errors in syntax in sentence structure, in increasing the demonstration of correct punctuation of declarative and interrogative sentences, increasing the usage of commas in sentences with pauses, increases in the demonstration of subject verb agreement in simple sentences, and increases in organization and legibility.

Preliminary steps were taken before the writer implemented the program. The writer created a timetable and prepared a log to record

activities; consulted with special education consultant; reviewed curriculum components and expanded writing; kept satisfactory components and eliminated problem areas; interviewed business and community members to find out the functional language needed in business settings; reviewed data on the 1994 - 1995 classes strengths and weaknesses; researched successful process writing strategies; educated the paraprofessional on the strategies, methods of instruction, and assessment; continued to educate the principal and enlisted support; interviewed English and computer teachers on quality word processing software; gained access to computers and software.

The implementation plan was monitored closely. When situations involving logistics, personnel, and student performance became apparent; immediate adaptations were made. Bonstingl (1992) theorized that close monitoring and program modification ensures continuous improvement. This is a part of continuous learning and improvement.

The solution described strategies and the results that others have had in dealing with the problem of written English fluency and the writer has strong evidence that warranted the chosen solution strategies for improvement of written communications.

Report of Action Taken

The writer took the following steps in implementing the program. Parents were notified via letter and telephone about the practicum. The parents were empowered to support students in the program. Open communications were kept with the parents throughout

the implementation. The practicum was discussed with the students and they were informed that this was a creative venture and they would make a difference in helping the writer to solve a problem. Students were very positive and encouraged at the thought of assisting a teacher to solve a problem.

Students' reading levels were assessed and reading levels indicated regression occurred during summer vacation; therefore, the reading and language program began earlier than anticipated. Ten students (7 males and 3 females) of the anticipated 14 participated in the practicum. Chronological ages ranged from 14.0 to 15.0. Nine of the students had been identified by school psychologists as mildly intellectually disabled. One male student had been identified as being borderline mildly and moderately disabled.

Additionally, the student had a severe speech and language impairment, delayed fine motor skills, weaknesses in tracking and/or hand eye coordination. The student displayed difficulties in manipulating small objects or utensils. Letter formation was very dysgraphic. Three other male students received speech services and each had mild to moderate impairments.

Nine of the ten students were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Parental support concerning academics was received from nine of ten families. The objective assessment methods were reviewed again and calendar logs for calculating the writing samples were developed for each student which indicated the students' performance. Records were kept in the students' journals and reviewed as necessary.

The students were introduced to technology in the media center in order to make them aware of the types of technology they later used during the practicum. During the media tour, students acknowledged that they had some prior experience using computers.

The language program was a crucial component of the practicum and was selected because previous skills were built upon as students progressed. The weekly focus for each 90 minute language session was to sharpen the awareness of the function of words, word formation rules involving tense, and placement of words in sentences. Previously taught words were grouped according to classes of words. Each weekly activity provided practice in placing words in sentences and in the use of sentence patterns; however, stress was on reading rather than grammar and on the function of words rather than identification of parts of speech.

The instructional method was a type of group mastery learning. Assessments were made then students were given individual remediation. Throughout the practicum implementation enrichment exercises regularly were provided when students writing samples reflected a need for remediation. The focus of the language component for the first week of instruction was on students demonstrating an understanding of the addition of inflectional endings (s) and (es) to words and demonstrating capitalization and punctuation (use of periods) in sentences. In conversing with students, it was evident there were difficulties with morphology. There were dialectal alterations in the formation of words. Eight students in the practicum were of minority descent which influenced

dialect. The dialectal differences were in the usage of words where (es) and (s) may not occur consistently at the end of words; or not stating the proper noun possessive of the common noun properly. For example, It the boy pencil.

During week two, students were provided an opportunity to produce a writing sample. A crucial strategy was used before every writing session. The strategy was used to increase students' confidence, to decrease anxieties, and increase comfort levels. This type of buffering was significant in motivating the students to write. The journal entries were not ever criticized. This antecedent event was executed before every writing session. From the onset, sessions were prefaced with the statement that the entries did not have to be perfect.

During this week two of the male students were anxious about making spelling errors. Before the assessment, the writer allotted time for a discussion of a current event of the past summer, which had been very disastrous and affected everyone in the community. The discussion, which the writer considered a prewriting activity lasted exactly ten minutes. The writer brought back memories of the students' experiences, then provided five minutes for students to think about what they wanted to say. Then the writer requested that they write in their journals for 20 minutes.

This instructional strategy was accomplished before every writing session. It was emphasized that they weren't to ponder over spelling. The writer requested that students write what they thought a word sounded like when they said it to themselves. After the

assessment was given, the daily plan for writing in journals was explained to the students and was administered the same time daily for 20 minutes. One student who is borderline mild and moderately disabled was requested to respond verbally to the instructor and/or paraprofessional and his responses were recorded in the journal. The major goal for this student was to increase his speech from one and two word phrases to complete verbal responses. The writer was also cautious to ensure that every activity was evaluated to enhance instruction. The journals were collected daily and the writer wrote a response in each students journal. A sample of student A's journal entries are displayed in Figure 1 to display the increase in fluency and consistency of capitalization and punctuation.

The initial assessment reflected positively on the students' capabilities. Six of ten students had some conception of writing complete sentences; however, the assessment was indicative of errors in capitalization, punctuation, spelling, subject verb agreement, and disorganization of information on the paper. Legibility wasn't a major problem. Students were knowledgeable of capitalization; but it wasn't used consistently. Students confused the period and question mark. Students displayed difficulties with the usage of being verbs, for example, He good. Irregular verbs and verb tense were difficult. Daily assignments submitted by students displayed moderate capitalization, punctuation, spelling errors, and disorganization of words on the page. In conversing with the students, three of them weren't ever required to use capitalization, punctuation, and other rules. Also, all students weren't ever

required to provide answers in complete sentences in verbal or written form. Students' progress was evaluated and if skills taught in the curriculum didn't transcend, a response for students to pattern was written in the journal.

The writer responded daily to all entries written in students' journals. The writer modeled grammatically correct sentences and correctly spelled words using the same misspelled words the students used or variations of the words in a similar type sentence.

Scheduling was thought to be a problem initially upon implementation; however, the present schedule the students were using provided many exciting experiences from which to write about. Since there were so many exciting activities occurring in exploratory classes during the second week, students were provided story starters, such as: Yesterday I ..., Popcorn Is...., and Dear Teacher.

After the writer's first responses in the journal, seven of ten students modeled correct placement of writing on the page which included the date, marginal spacing, and paragraph indentions. Students used appropriate marginal spacing for daily assignments after a model was provided. The writer observed students reviewing a previous journal entry while writing a new entry. Patterning of a competent writer was evidenced and consistent with Grant et al. (1992).

During the third week, the emphasis of the language program was on inflectional endings (ed) and (d). Students appeared to have difficulty with this area of morphology. Accents were placed on students' understanding of the function of questions ending with a

question mark and beginning with a capital letter. A transdisciplinary approach to planning classroom instruction began through collaborating with the speech teacher.

In this instance special educators became resources to each other. Providing speech in this manner assists students in interacting appropriately with peers. The speech therapist and the writer collaborated weekly regarding speech services for four students requiring it in their IEP's. It was more feasible to teach speech within the students classroom setting. All students participating in the practicum received speech weekly on Monday's for sixty minutes. The speech program complemented the weekly language lessons. The goal was to improve students functional conversational skills through rehearsal which was anticipated to increase writing fluency by lengthening sentences, and improving word usage, and sentence structure. Students rehearsed sentences with the speech therapist and with peers. Dialogue and role playing were the focus of each session.

A cooperative writing experience was completed where students were partnered and wrote about a topic of their choice. During the third week of implementation, the program became language rich with students reading functionally appropriate current events newspapers in content areas. With the support of the parents students watched the local and national news nightly. This was to increase their awareness of events happening in the community and around the world. Topics written during the week were based on students television favorites. They were: Ren and Stimpy are..., My favorite television

commercial is..., Dear Teacher..., This week I learned.... The writer's observations during the writing sessions were ones of excitement, eagerness, and an anxiousness to communicate. Students who had moderate spelling difficulties displayed a great zest for writing in their journals. There wasn't a reluctance to write as previously indicated in literature. As the instructor, the writer was very motivated and discussed the enjoyment she received from reading and responding to the class. Two male students continually made frequent requests for the writer to spell words. The writer emphasized that she knew what they were spelling and would write back. Each student read the writer's responses and observed how the response was written and what was written. Progress was monitored.

During week four, the students reviewed language skills and demonstrated an understanding of the (ing) ending and identified where natural pauses should be indicated in writing, using a comma in the corresponding place. Possessives were introduced. The speech therapist provided a complimentary lesson. Students made journal entries as scheduled. The students were very receptive to a field trip around the school grounds to view the fall scenery. The journal entries didn't reflect regression in that students made an effort to write simple but complete sentences and used punctuation. Students topics included: Over the weekend I..., Response about the school trip, Response about the audio version of "Freckle Juice" by Judy Blume, and Dear Teacher.. . Progress was monitored.

During week five, students were introduced to conversation punctuation and its use in writing. The students demonstrated the

use of exclamation points at the end of sentences and began them with a capital letter. The usage of contractions was introduced. Students displayed difficulties and omitted the contracted forms of words, for example, I do better. The speech teacher provided a complimentary speech lesson. An exciting field trip to a local auditorium provided an excellent experience for students to write about. Students participated in the videotaping of a popular music concert for the Department of the Defense. Students made journal entries as scheduled in their journals. Topics students responded to were: The field trip was..., If I were a number..., If I were a crayon, I would be the color ...., and Dear Teacher.... Progress was monitored.

During week six, the students were familiarized with the function of naming words or nouns and used them properly in sentences. The speech teacher provided a complimentary lesson. The writer consulted again with the computer technology instructor. The schedules conflicted and the writer discussed the function of the computer, the different components, and their relationship to the others. Students were familiarized with computer usage for school as well as usage for purposes outside of school. Awareness was increased about having appropriate skills for applications in other environments. The message was that the computer has become an indispensable personal tool for society.

It was anticipated that students would use the computer to write dialogue and type an entry Dear Teacher. Students made written journal entries. This was more feasible during this week because of

the demands and operations of keyboarding. Computer entries were rescheduled for a later week. Progress was monitored.

During week seven, students learned the function of action words in sentences and used (er) to identify one who does. Students displayed difficulty with comparative and superlative word endings, for example, She is more beautifuller. The speech instructor provided a complimentary lesson. Students participated in more enriching activities and writing increased to 35 minutes daily. The curriculum was more integrated, such as, integrating while keeping separate subjects. Two subjects were correlated so that similar content was taught at the same time and/or two or more subjects were integrated. For example, mini units were taught where content and skills from other subjects were stressed or a theme focused unit was used. For example, a Fall theme infused reading, writing, thinking, current events, audiovisuals, and art. This provided exciting experiences for students. Additionally, writing was completed in science, math, and social studies. Many times skills and content were integrated informally. For example, while teaching one subject, content was included from another along with writing.

Topics during week seven were varied in that students responded on a variety of issues and current events. Some of them were: punishments of the past..., If a comet hit earth..., Currently in Kuwait..., Last nights breaking news event was...., Students responded in journals concerning personal communications to the writer. A total of 350 minutes were used for writing.

During week eight, parents were notified via school conference or via telephone conference of students' progress. The students demonstrated an understanding of the function of nouns and state of being verbs in simple sentence patterns. For example, noun-verb, noun-verb-noun, and noun-verb-noun with the noun used as a direct object. The speech teacher provided a complimentary lesson. Journal entries were made as scheduled and the computer application was completed with the entry for Dear Teacher. The students rotated the entire day in order to type in their entries. Applying computer applications during this week helped students understand that writing was a process where errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar can improve. The built in feature of the software program most used by the students was the spelling checker. The students were still writing for 350 minutes weekly. Topics entered into the journals were: The state fair was..., If I won the lottery..., Football scuffles..., What confuses me about math is .... , I use numbers for..., and Dear Teacher ... among other topics. Progress was monitored.

During week nine, the students demonstrated an understanding of the usage of determiners or articles in noun-verb-noun sentence structure. An interdisciplinary unit or a thematic unit on Halloween provided language rich experiences and a variety of activities which focused on the history of Halloween, the symbols, customs, folklore, and fantasy. The speech instructor provided additional vocabulary and presented the words in a story format. They were introduced to "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving. An audiotaped

read along version was presented in 19th century American prose. The vernacular for the period of time was discussed by providing students with currently used and easily understandable terminology. All activities were on the students functional levels. The students read along and listened to the story which was presented during social studies. The videotaped version of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Walt Disney Productions was shown; thereby, giving a vivid account of the story. In current science, students explored naturally preserved mummies and compared them to Egyptian mummies then discussed the mummy as a Halloween symbol. Skills were taught across all disciplines. The video, the "The Nightmare Before Christmas" by Tim Burton was viewed to show how symbols for Halloween were depicted as actual characters in a movie production and to reinforce that the symbols aren't real. Topics entered in journals were related to the interdisciplinary unit. For example, If I could change my name..., The strange things I've heard about mummies..., The differences between a natural mummy and an Egyptian mummy ..., The character I liked the most..., and Dear Teacher. Progress was monitored.

During week ten, the students demonstrated an understanding of sentences with expanded sentence patterns. The speech teacher provided a complimentary lesson. Journal entries were made. The topics were: On Halloween I plan to..., Halloween night I..., and Dear Teacher.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

The anticipated goal of the practicum was that 12 of 14 students would exhibit written expression skills for the purposes of communication. The outcome wasn't met. The writer's classroom enrollment was smaller than expected. The number of students that were able to successfully participate were ten. Therefore, the goal was adjusted to expect that at least eight of ten students would exhibit written expression skills for the purposes of communication.

Even though the outcome wasn't met, seven of ten students exhibited written expression skills for communications purposes. Based upon the writer's standards, the practicum yielded positive results.

Discussion

Observations indicated that students' behaviors toward writing were different. Eagerness, motivation, and excitement were observed daily. These behaviors weren't consistent with the behaviors that previous students displayed. Students became more comfortable with themselves and their writing.

In relation to the evidence, patterning or modeling a competent writer was consistent with the findings of (Grant, Lazarus, and

Peyton, 1992; Farley, 1986; & McGrath, 1992). During the first week of writing, students immediately modeled the placement of the writer's responses on the page within the journals. Improvement was observed in mechanics, especially with capitalization and punctuation. Evidence in the interaction studies of (Farley, 1986; Grant, Lazarus, & Peyton, 1992; & McGrath, 1992) were consistent in that students' writing growth was stimulated by the language rich experiences. The findings of Farley (1986) are consistent in that the increase of writing time increases skills. Students' errors in spelling decreased and punctuation was used more consistently. Correct word sequences displayed minimal increases then tapered off; but the amount written (fluency) increased.

Results were consistent with the findings of McGrath (1992) and Mitchell (1987) with the inclusion of the speech teacher to increase conversational skills. The speech teacher was an accurate model for language acquisition. Instructional techniques such as, role playing, verbal rehearsal, and group discussions assisted in language development. Students began to express themselves more freely in verbal and written form. Computer usage wasn't consistent with the findings of Vacc (1987). The computer was arduous because of the mechanics of keyboarding.

The holistic assessment instrument which enabled the writer to make adaptations during the implementation was used to monitor students growth and regression in areas of spelling, legibility, correct word sequences, and number of words written. Enrichment was provided when there was a moderate regression. Proper usage of

capitalization and punctuation was monitored by teacher observation. The students' initial writing sample yielded that the percentage of correctly spelled words was 84.9%, the percentage of legible words was 89.9%, the average of correct word sequences was 4.25 words.

At practicum mid-point, performance yielded the percentage of correctly spelled words as 93.8%, the percentage of legible words as 98.0%, the average of correct word sequences as 4.82 words. At practicum end, the students' performance yielded the percentage of correctly spelled words as 93.1%, average of correct word sequences was 4.30.

Varying degrees of improvement were observed in the practicum. Figure 1 displays a sample of a student's entries into his journal on the fourth and thirty-seventh journal entries. Both samples were completed in twenty minutes; however, the students were writing twice a day later in the practicum when the 37th entry was written.

4th entry - Popcorn is....

Popcorn is good. I like popcorn. Popcorn is health for people. Some people don't like popcorn. I like chesee popcorn the best. When I go to the movie I buy popcorn. My brother in I love popcorn... Student A

37th entry - If I won the lottery...

If I won the lottery I will be happy. I will go to the store in pick my money up. I will put some in the bank. I will buy a car, a house, then my hole family will come with me on a trip to sea world. The lottery is a great thing to play. You can play the lottery with a stright box, the combo, the box. The number was last night was 009 but my aunt had it 900 stright box. I will buy a forchain with me and my family. I will bring my teachers with me... Student A

Figure 1. Sample from Student A's journal

In relation to the student's entry in Figure 1., there may be a possibility of later employing instructional strategies for paragraph development. The results are consistent with the previous dialogue journal and research. The results are indicative of and document that disabled students are capable of acquiring skills from a competent writer. The results suggest that poor written communications skills seem to be related to non exposure to standard organization of the English language and non exposure to writing. Students stated during a conversation that there hadn't been any

instruction in writing. The results are consistent with that of the research of (Hadaway & Tishe, 1987; Mather & Lachowicz, 1992) that language rich experiences provided a frame of reference for students writing.

As indicated in research of Farley (1986), results support that students were capable of writing about events that were age appropriate. The results implicated that mildly intellectually disabled students are able to successfully communicate for functional purposes within the information society if given the proper instructional guidance. A combination of instructional methods which were consistently employed and monitored validated success.

Recommendations

The writer recommends the following if practitioners plan to further this solution: (1) access a paraprofessional or parent volunteers (2) make accommodations for students with secondary exceptionalities to participate in the program (3) emphasize functional writing and focus on experiences within students lives as well as new experiences (4) emphasize the function of grammar rather than emphasizing parts of speech (5) consistently model writing patterns in journals and daily assignments.

Dissemination

Within the writer's work setting, educators are provided the opportunity to submit materials to the media specialist for associates to implement in their classrooms. The writer will seek to communicate the results and share information with colleagues system

wide. The writer submitted the practicum abstract to the local Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in applying for a mini-grant to assist in the continuation of the program. The recipient of the funding will present their project at the local (CEC) spring meeting. The writer also has plans to submit the results of the practicum for publication in professional journals when there is a call for papers in the practicum area. Further, the writer is seeking available opportunities as time permits to present the practicum at meetings and conferences.

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